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MILTON'S CONCEPT OF WOMAN

by

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## A B S T R A C T

Women held a complex, even contradictory place in the Puritan ethic; not any less so in the mind of John Milton. They occupy in the canon of his work an important role, both as the subjects of his prose treatises and minor poetry, and as the characters of his major poems. Although steeped in Puritan tradition and sometimes subordinated to dramatic requirements, the woman of Milton's mature poetry is often treated with a degree of understanding which, if it did not strain Puritan theory, certainly transcended Puritan practice.





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## CHAPTER I

### TRADITIONAL PURITAN VIEW OF WOMAN

The object of this first chapter is to provide a statement of Puritan opinion of woman as background against which to assess the originality and individuality of Milton's opinions of woman. With this background in mind it will be easier to judge to what extent woman, as she enters into Milton's prose and poetry, is typically Puritan or to what extent she is a creature outside the Puritan conception.

The most abundant sources of Puritan ideas about woman are the sixteenth and seventeenth century Domestic Conduct Books, and the sermons of Puritan divines, both forms of literature in which Milton was well read. The conduct books and sermons drew primarily upon the traditional Christian view of woman which held her to be socially and physically inferior to man, but, because of Christ's teachings about the equality of souls, man's spiritual equal. Milton accepted this doctrine: he believed that man's social and physical superiority derived naturally from his having been created first but that men and women inherit grace equally.

But if woman was socially inferior, by no means did she hold a position of mere servitude, either for Milton or for Puritans in general. Early Christians had passed on to the Puritans a concept of woman inherited from the Romans: that the woman was not a slave but a self-respecting subject of her lord. She laboured alongside him in the fields, was the nurse and teacher of his children, attentive to his



clothing, food and medicine and the mainstay of his estate. Ideally she was stern, hardworking and prided herself on seriousness, piety and devotion to duty; lacking only Calvinism, she was the ancestor of the Puritan woman.

Puritan writers were concerned with the marriage relationship between man and wife, hence a great amount that has been written about the Puritan woman is in terms of her as a marriage partner. *The English Book of Common Prayer* (1549) defines marriage to be "an honourable estate, instituted of God in paradise, in the time of man's innocency signifying unto us the mystical union that is betwixt Christ and His Church." The objects of matrimony are the procreation of children, the relief of concupiscence<sup>1</sup>, and "the mutual society, help and comfort that the one ought to have of the other." After the marriage vows, there is a prayer entreating the husband to love his wife as Christ does his Church and the wife to be to the husband as loving as Rachel, as wise as Rebecca and as faithful and obedient as Sarah. After the holy communion the minister delivers a sermon "in which the office of a man and wife shall be declared according to holy scripture."<sup>2</sup>

The scripture was taken as guide to all questions concerning marriage and related subjects. The origin of matrimony was accounted for in Genesis by an etiological myth which was made even more real by the family example of Abraham, Isaac, Jacob and their wives Sarah, Rebecca, and Rachel. This was the Puritan holy family, having the father as the apex and the beloved wife beneath but close beside him.<sup>3</sup> But the Puritan's idea of patriarchy was quite different from that of earlier systems of female subordination. Unlike Greek wives, Puritan





women were supposed to be good companions to their husbands; unlike early Christian and mediaeval wives, they were not subordinate because of their vileness and frailties, but because of their adaptation to childbearing and home-making. The Puritans especially admired certain women in the Old Testament, notably Ruth, Abigail and the virtuous wife in the thirty-first chapter of Proverbs<sup>4</sup> who were thought to have shown character and ability above most of their sex, without overstepping the due limits of wifely obedience. The Gospel of Matthew recorded Christ's rebuke to the Pharisees on the subject of divorce, Peter supplied a summary statement of the duties of husband and wife, but it was Paul in I Corinthians (7) and Ephesians (5, 22-33) supplemented by others in Colossians (3, 18-19), I Timothy (2, 11-13) who chiefly set men thinking about the meaning of marriage conveyed in the rest of Scripture.<sup>5</sup> The Puritan always had in mind that marriage was,

an hie, holye and blessed order of life, ordayned not of man, but of God, yea and that not in this sinneful world, but in paradyse that most joyfull garden of pleasure: which (Matrimonye) hath ever ben had in great honor and reverence among all nacions; wherein one man and one woman are coupled and knit together in one fleshe and body in the feare and love of God, by the free, loving, hartly and good consente of them both, to the entente that they two may dwel together, as one fleshe and body of one wyl and mind in all honesty, virtue and godlines, and spend theyr lyves in the equal partaking of all such thinges, as God shal send them with thankes gevyng.<sup>6</sup>

This statement, often repeated in one form or another, refers to the grand object of matrimony—companionship—which to the Puritan mind superseded and comprehended all others. "God made the man Adam altogether perfect, set him in the Paradise or garden of pleasure and afterwards sayd immediatly: It is not good that man should be alone."

Adam, having looked upon all the beasts, "found . . . none that he could





set his harte upon, none lyke himselfe, none that he myght dwell by as by an helper and comforter."<sup>7</sup> He knew that he was alone, and woe, says Henry Smith, quoting Solomon, to all such: "as theeves, steale in when the house is emptie; like a Turtle, which hath lost his mate, like one legge when the other is cutte off, like one wing when the other is clipte, so had the man bene if the woman had not bene joyned to him."<sup>8</sup> Thus the first need that befell man, even before he had sinned, was for woman, and the first intervention of divine providence on man's behalf was to create a wife for him and establish wedlock as the prime source and pattern of all human relationships to come. "Marriage was made and appointed by God himselfe to be the fountaine and seminarie of all sorts and kinds of life, in the Common-wealth and in the Church."<sup>9</sup> It was itself a state and a religious order, one which looked to God as its founder.

Milton looked at marriages as made in heaven, but marriages were established upon the nature of man rather than the external *command* of God. Before the fall, Adam had the law of nature innate in him to teach him "whatever is agreeable to right reason, that is to say, whatever is intrinsically good."<sup>10</sup> What led him to marry was either his own head and heart, concurring with God's advice, or it was an arbitrary command outside the law of nature. Milton said that it was the former—Adam's rational awareness of his own needs. Milton quoted God saying: "It is not good for man to be alone" and pointed out that God "presents himself like to a man deliberating" to show "that he intended to found marriage according to natural reason, not impulsive command, but that the duty should arise from the reason of it, not the



reason be swallowed up in a reasonless duty."<sup>11</sup> Milton is in accord with the Puritan idea that marriages were made in heaven, but he is prepared to explain his stand fully and what appears, as in other of Milton's writings, is his insistence on the liberty and responsibility of the individual.

In the society being shaped, the Puritan family household, with its extensions in farmstead and shop and its relation to religious life, was assuming an importance it had not had in feudal, monastic or courtly society. The preachers described it again and again as a little church and a little state, in which the father was responsible for providing religious instruction, prayer and reading of scriptures, and for the employment of each member, according to his or her ability in some useful occupation. Everything in the past of these men required them to think of the family as patriarchal, and yet the more important the family became to them as an institution, the more important became the role assigned to woman in the life of man and more imperative the need to understand, define and explain that role.

In the order of nature woman was obviously not man's equal. Husband and wife, Perkins explains, are a couple, and a couple "is that whereby two persons standing in mutual relation to each other, are combined together as it were in one. And of these two, the one is alwaies the higher and beareth rule, the other is lower and yeeldeth subjection."<sup>12</sup> Some women were superior to some men, as Abigail to Nabal, and on occasion a woman might be singled out by God for a special purpose, as Deborah was, but to think that woman in general would be anything but subordinate was plainly contrary to nature and reason.





The idea of woman's superiority was contrary to the express word of God in scripture, to the conditions imposed upon woman in Genesis, to the example of the patriarchs, and to the precepts of Paul. "Wives, submit yourselves to your own husbands," he said, "for the husband is the head of the wife." Man "is the image and glory of God: but the woman is the glory of the man." She was created of and for him. In accordance with what the Puritan divines were teaching, Milton, too, emphasized the subordination of woman: "[It is necessary] that the husband bear himself as the head and preserver of his wife, instructing her in all godliness and integrity of life"; but he did not hesitate to add that woman had an important part to play in this relationship; the wife was to be "to her husband a help, according to her place, especially furthering him in the true worship of God, and next in all the occasions of civil life."<sup>13</sup> Milton's contribution to a prevailing doctrine was, as in many instances, to expand on the prevailing teaching and somehow to direct attention to woman as a living, acting, feeling individual. He gives woman a more human, concrete dimension in his writing, as distinct from the rather lifeless generalizations that came from the pens of his contemporaries.

The most systematic and detailed statement from the Puritan pulpit of the doctrine of the submission of woman is William Gouge's. He launches into this theme with a discussion of subjection in general—that is, of order. God has so disposed of everyone that there is no one who is not subjected to some superior. The child is subject to its mother, she to her husband, he to the magistrate, he to the king, the king to God. Everyone is set in his place, not for his own, but



for others' good.<sup>14</sup> The man was called to rule over his wife and family just as the king was called to rule over his people, and he was by nature granted greater gifts, corresponding to the greater service required of him. But the essence of all obedience to the vocations that God issues is willingness, and this came especially to mind whenever the preachers undertook to instruct wives in their duty to their husbands. William Whately says:

Out of place, out of peace; woe to those miserable aspiring shoulders which will not content themselves to take their rooms below the head. Whosoever therefore doth desire or purpose to bee a good wife or to live comfortably, let her set downe this conclusion within her soule: mine husband is my superior, my better: he hath authoritie and rule over me, nature hath given it him, having framed our bodies to tender-nesse, mens to more hardness; God hath given it him, saying to our first mother Evah; thy desire shall be subject to thine husband, and hee shall rule over thee.<sup>15</sup>

Unless the woman freely acknowledged obedience to be her first duty there could be no assurance that she would faithfully fulfil any other.

One should not conclude from such statements that Puritan women became notably subservient or that they were imposed upon by their lords and masters. The contrary was as likely as not the fact. The mental lives of women were being enlarged by the increase of wealth, the growing importance of the family household with its regular reading of the Word, prayers, attendance upon sermons, and the development of a vernacular literature centering upon the translated scriptures. There may have been a very natural human reason why men should have insisted upon the submission due them from their wives. It is not commonly necessary to preach submission to the meek.

There was one reservation in wifely obedience, however, and that an important one. Wives were commanded to obey their husbands, but they





were commanded first to obey God. God communicated by his word and through conscience as freely with wives as with husbands. If the husband forbade the wife to perform a godly duty on any occasion, she would plead with him, admonish and advise him; if this failed she then must obey God and disobey her husband. Such duty was a large gift of liberty in the whole history of masculine supremacy. Preachers were not prepared to let this go too far but it became the tool which disrupted the divines' efforts to govern life too strictly according to their notions of the meaning of scripture.

If the divines concerned themselves with sermons on marriage, the goods and evils thereof, the responsibilities, the duties, the satisfactions and dissatisfactions, an equally absorbing theme was woman herself--the woman most to be desired for a wife. Needless to say she must above all things be virtuous and godly. The preacher frequently reminded his hearers that woman was the weaker vessel, but he dwelt more frequently upon the fact that the price of a good woman was above rubies. As the Church was to Christ, the wife was to her husband, "graced with gifts and imbrodered with vertues as if we married holiness her selfe."<sup>16</sup> The holiness and good conditions of a companion "contributed ten times more than rank, wealth or beauty. He takes the best course, to gaine content in marriage, that chuseth not the finest body, the sweetest face, the greatest state, the largest portion, but the holiest heart, the richest soule, the beautifullest spirit, and the most vertuous woman."<sup>17</sup>

If the Puritan wife was to be virtuous, she was also to be godly. Godliness in the age of Puritanism did not necessarily spell repression



and negation, but quite the opposite; and when preachers called for godliness in wives, they called women to an intensely active existence on the emotional and spiritual level as well as the physical and practical level. A woman who truly loved God would be sure to love God's image in her husband, as a godly man would be sure to love the image of God mirrored back to him from his wife. Though husband and wife were always to love God better than they loved each other, godliness behooved them all the more to love one another.

After godliness, the essential thing in a woman, if she was truly to be loved, was fitness of mind and soul. The goods of the mind were greater than those of the world, and if there was to be concord in marriage it must start with the parties knowing one another's natures, affections, and infirmities; trouble came when "one dooth not hit the measure of the others heart."<sup>18</sup>

Milton's concept of marriage is based on the same idea of "fitness of mind and soul" as the Puritan divines were emphasizing. The desire that God put into Adam in Paradise was "that desire . . . that man should not be left alone . . . the desire and longing to put off an unkindly solitariness by uniting another body, but not without a fit soul to his, in the cheerful society of wedlock."<sup>19</sup> For Milton and other Puritans, woman was made as a helpmeet to her husband and husband and wife were made to live in concord and mutual solace for one another. Concord could be gained most satisfactorily if the woman was capable of being an intelligent companion for her husband.

But what in the idiom of godliness was thought of beauty? It





was looked upon by the preachers with age-old misgivings; beauty was suspect up to a point and the godly were warned, as others had been, not to be misled by the delight of the eye. Who would not marry a righteous woman no matter how fair? Coverdale described a "comelie, beautiful or well favoured bodie" as "such a one, as is of right forme and shape, meete, and of strength to bear children, and to keepe and governe an house." "Beautie is a fraile gift and a slipprous one . . . the true lineaments and properties of fairness which entice and provoke spirituall and heavenly love, are to be found only in the mind."<sup>20</sup> The eye and the fancy by themselves are insufficient and dangerous counselors, nevertheless "where better things accompany them they are allowable . . . I mean, that both the eye and the heart be pleased, contented and satisfied."<sup>21</sup> The preachers did not look on beauty as something existing by itself and to be desired on its own account, but they acknowledged, now and then, the view that it might be the invention or discovery though not the cause of love.

The Puritan ideal of woman was of an individual created essentially for a marriage relationship with man. Within this relationship she performed the vital functions of procreation, she was the accepted object of man's natural desire, and above all she was companion to him. She was subordinate because she was created for man, not to be his equal, and therefore not endowed with qualities of leadership. The Puritan woman was, however, to be regarded as man's spiritual equal and she was given the freedom to interpret for herself, within limits, whether what her husband commanded was sinful or just, in accordance



with her being first of all required to obey God. Ideally then she had the characteristics which suited the role of wife and subordinate: she was sensible, virtuous, submissive, pious, industrious, and preferably, but not necessarily, attractive, and not least, she was suited mentally and emotionally to the nature of her husband.





## CHAPTER II

### FACTORS INFLUENCING MILTON'S ATTITUDE TOWARD WOMAN

Milton's attitude toward woman had been largely informed by Puritan doctrine as it echoed the scriptures, but this influence was not obvious in Milton's early life nor his early writings. His early work reflects his classical education and his lack of any close personal relationships with women. It is not until after Milton's early sonnets and elegies that it is possible to see the influence of Puritan sermons and domestic conduct books upon his attitude toward woman; his divorce tracts are the earliest reflection of the Puritan doctrine of marriage as it existed in the conduct books and sermon literature of the times.

It is the purpose of this chapter to consider, initially, Milton's early elegies and sonnets, as they reflect his own largely immature opinions, as they represent a record of his early education, and as they form a part of his view of woman. The divorce tracts cannot be treated in the same way. Although a statement of the position of woman in her role as marriage partner, they are considered here because of their revelation of Milton's maturing conception of the nature and place of woman.

The elegies constitute an immensely important year-by-year record of Milton's thoughts, feelings and literary development in the University and Horton periods. Having been brought up in an



environment predominantly masculine, where his only personal contact with women was limited to his mother and sister Anne, and the ubiquitous domestic, the young Milton created his own ideal of womanhood, based primarily on his prolific reading in the classics. . . . Because this image of woman is for the most part only a reflection of Ovid, Virgil or Petrarch, it remains conventional. Most interesting in this regard are the three elegies (I, IV, VII) in which Milton gives greatest rein to his delight in sensuous beauty and dallies with the thought of love.<sup>1</sup>

The first Latin elegy reveals Milton's reaction when in the spring of 1626 he found himself away from Cambridge and situated instead in his father's London house. The primary end of the elegy, which is in the form of a letter to Diodati, seems to be to give his friend a brief account of how he is faring; but Milton instead inadvertently reveals the emotional effect upon himself of the experience of London life. It is in this elegy that Milton makes early reference to woman. He speaks of himself as a visitor to the woods where he admires groups of "maidens" that go dancing past. These presences, though at a distance, are intensely real. He launches forth in a kind of panegyric extolling English beauty above that of Greek and Roman, but in essence only echoes classical love poetry. The poem is rather naive in sentiment, but it provides a good view of Milton at seventeen and a key to his youthful personality. It seems that only by alluding to pagan mythology, to the classical studies in which his mind had been steeped since early childhood, was he able to attempt to sing the praises of woman.





Elegy V adds really very little to Milton's personal view of woman. It is an elegy on the coming of spring and in ecstasy over this the poet writes of the reviving earth as a voluptuous woman who is lovely and has the power to charm (lines 63-79). If anything, this elegy prepares one for the deification of woman, characteristic of the Renaissance, that manifests itself in Elegy VII. This latter elegy, however, is only a half-serious game with the traditional Ovidian theme of the poet's conquest by Cupid. It is excessive in praise of woman though Milton confesses to a losing game with Cupid:

Heedlessly I sent my glances to encounter theirs and lost all control of my eyes. Then, by chance, I caught sight of one who was supreme above all the rest; her radiance was the beginning of my disaster. In such a guise Venus herself might choose to appear to mortals. Glorious to look upon, like her must the queen of the gods have been. She was thrown in my way by the grudge-harboring rascal Cupid; he alone has woven these snares in my path.<sup>2</sup>

Such a complaint of the lover--the glance, the sighing, and the frustration of the lover for the unattainable object of his affection--parallels the courtly love poetry of the preceding centuries.

Elegy VII is written in a playful mood, but the "retraction" that immediately follows it makes one suddenly aware of the man behind the artificiality of the poem and may imply that all the elegies were written in a vein Milton felt himself to be outgrowing.<sup>3</sup> Regarded, though, as an epilogue to Elegy VII, Milton's protestation that he had outgrown his infatuation and was now proof against Cupid gives a strong presumption that Elegy VII itself is not a mere Ovidian exercise but is in addition a record of genuine experience.

As a boy Milton was required to read Ovid, and it would appear



that through this reading Milton discovered elements in his nature which he did not deny. He learned quickly to love beauty but also to shun unchastity.<sup>4</sup> In this spirit he soon discovered even greater pleasure in Dante and Petrarch, who revealed, in the beauty and the love of woman, the image of the soul. Milton was particularly interested in the view that beauty and goodness were one and the same thing, and that a beautiful woman commanded worship.<sup>5</sup> Milton was later to make a definite statement of this view—that the beautiful appearance of a woman reflected the state of her soul—when describing the Lady in *Comus* and Eve in *Paradise Lost*.

Milton found in Dante and Petrarch not the grosser enticements of the flesh, but an exaltation of woman and a refinement of the sentiment of love, all of which embodied his new aspirations. The key to his attitude is furnished by the sixth Elegy, in which Milton takes farewell of the mood of light indulgence in favor of earnest asceticism. In this Elegy (Dec., 1629), addressed to Diodati as a reply to a letter in which Diodati described his revels at the Christmas season, Milton expresses dissatisfaction with the trifling verse he has been composing, and announces himself an epic poet and resolves to live a life dedicated to that end.

It was after this self-dedication that Milton's sonnets were written and they reflect some of his new aspirations.<sup>6</sup> Any of these sonnets, however, that deal with woman, closely resemble in theme and attitude the seventh elegy. As a whole they are Milton's deliberate attempt to follow in the Petrarchan convention. In these sonnets





Milton writes about a woman who had attracted him,<sup>7</sup> and who seemed to respond to his interest, but the sonnets form no definite statement of his view of woman. She is beautiful, charming, gracious and sings well. She is a dark-haired, dark-eyed Italian girl, and the sonnets become a record of an early experience set down in conventional form.

As a whole, the early sonnets and elegies reflect a rather immature Milton, a Milton who actually had very little close experience with women, and who found that conventional forms of poetry allowed him the necessary distance from his subject to indulge his fancy for classical imagery. The elegies and sonnets form a part of Milton's view of woman, however, in that they reveal his appreciation for the beauty of a woman. This appreciation remains alive in Milton's later poetry when he again writes of woman in the persons of the Lady, Eve and Dalila.

The literature of chivalry became a part of Milton's literary background. He was occupied not only with the stories of knighthood in Geoffery or Malory, which were his earliest acquaintances, but with the Renaissance interpretation of them; above all by Spenser. From this Romantic involvement Milton learned that it was "in the oath of every knight that he should defend to the expense of his best blood . . . the honor and chastity of virgin or matron; from whence even then I learned what a noble virtue chastity must be, to the defense of which so many worthies, by such a dear adventure of themselves, had sworn."<sup>8</sup> The chivalry stories provided only a beginning for Milton's examination of the theme of chastity, for he found in Plato and in Christianity additional material, all of which later occupied a central place in *Comus*.



While Milton was involved with Romantic poetry, he was at the same time becoming increasingly more absorbed with the study of philosophy. The character of his references shows that it is Plato's high doctrine of love and virtue, found in the *Symposium*, that chiefly attracted him. Love which is purely spiritual and devoid of sensual feeling was, for Milton, truly love. Only love which ends in the soul could produce knowledge and virtue in the lovers. The way of ascent of love, which Plato describes in the *Symposium*, begins at the level of physical attraction but what is originally an attraction for a face or beautiful body can pass into admiration for the character of the individual who possesses these attributes. The particular beauties of one character are then discovered to be held in common, to some degree, with all other characters. It is not that one individual is equal in beauty of character to another, but something beyond that—a kind of equality in the abstract. This leads to love of beauty in form; beauty in the abstract. It is therefore folly not to see the beauty belonging to all. Having grasped this truth, one becomes a lover of all beautiful forms. The final advancement, then, is to set a higher value on the abstract beauty of souls than on that of the body. The summit in this ascent is the love of all that is beautiful and good. Through the influence of Plato, Milton was acquiring the background, that he would later use, for the idea that woman's greatest attribute was her character, that man loved her and would continue to love her, on a level far above the physical, because he found in her a "soul-mate."





In the period between the stage in Milton's education where the idealism of Dante, Petrarch, Spenser and Plato had its effective appeal, and the period where he returned, in the divorce tracts, to consideration of woman, much had happened to Milton that influenced his attitude toward women. After his return from Italy a new vigor and a somewhat new direction had been given to his program of literary action. He was still the Platonist in that there was a continuation and a development of his earlier thoughts of chastity and love,<sup>9</sup> but new interests took him out of his exclusive preoccupation with artistic expression and into the world of public debate. He continued his work on the program of historical issues and entered into the field of church politics with his anti-episcopal tracts. With the specific charge of unchastity launched against him by Bishop Hall, Milton was prompted to an elaborate review of his personal ideals—which easily became a review also of his changing literary taste—in his *Apology for Smectymnus*.

Milton's marriage followed shortly after the publication of the last tract dealing with church government. It is with reluctance that one undertakes to add another statement to the ~~superabundance~~ of discussion on this marriage. There were difficulties on both sides; Milton was thirty-three, his bride seventeen; they knew nothing of each other and she, at least, nothing of his way of life. Only an abundance of love and understanding on Milton's part could bridge the gap, and this was not forthcoming. The normal process of adjustment was interrupted and serious frustration was the result. But what did come from the relationship was a personal, intimate knowledge of





woman, a knowledge that Milton employed in the divorce tracts and one which was not obvious in his earlier works.

In writing the *Doctrine and Discipline of Divorce*,<sup>10</sup> printed for the first time in 1643,<sup>11</sup> Milton takes a realistic view of woman, in sharp contrast to the ideal creature he had written about in his previous works. Milton is no longer attracted to woman because of outward form of beauty or grace. The ideal he sets up as the perfect complement for man must be on a par with man intellectually and she must be his help-mate. His view of woman in the divorce tracts is, however, incorporated in his consideration of her as marriage partner. His opinion of her as an individual must be extracted from his comments upon her as a wife.

For Milton, marriage was concerned first with the mind and the heart and then with the body. It is his greatest assertion that marriage consists "not so much in body, as in unity of mind and heart."<sup>12</sup> This harmony of mind amounts to full spiritual sympathy and understanding, the ability to see and appreciate the character of the marriage partner and to furnish help and solace.

In the doctrine set forth in the divorce tracts, Milton is firm in his stand that the husband should be the head of the house and that the wife should be subordinate. He asks: "Who can be ignorant that woman was created for man, and not man for woman?"<sup>13</sup> Marriage was instituted at creation with superior rights reserved to the husband:

St. Paul . . . explains that the woman is not primarily and immediately the image of God, but in reference to the man: "The head of the woman," saith he, I Cor. xi., "is the man"; "he the image and Glory of God, she the glory of the man"; he not for her, but she for him. Therefore his



precept is, "Wives, be subject to your husbands as is fit in the Lord," Col.iii.18.<sup>14</sup>

But man is not to hold his wife as a servant; he is rather "to receive her into a part of that empire which God proclaims him to, though not equally, yet largely as his own image and glory: for it is no small glory to him, that a creature so like him should be made subject to him."<sup>15</sup> Although God created woman for man she was not to be chattel but a meet solace and a meet help for man: "God supplies the prevention of not good [loneliness], with the perfect gift of a real and positive good [woman]."<sup>16</sup>

Milton regards marriage as that "institution which God ordained in the beginning before the fall, when man and woman were both perfect."<sup>17</sup> The end to which God ordained marriage was "the apt and cheerful conversation of man with woman, to comfort and refresh him against the evil of solitary life."<sup>18</sup> This expression as Milton interprets it does not imply carnal satisfaction, but implies prevention of loneliness to the mind and spirit of man: "It is not the joyning of another body [that] will remove loneliness, but the uniting of another compliable mind."<sup>19</sup> Milton finds Canon Law preposterous in that it has made such careful provisions against the impediment of carnal performance, yet has no law that cares for the "unconversing inability of mind, so defective to the purest and most sacred end of matrimony."<sup>20</sup> However natural and beautiful the physical end of marriage may be, for Milton it is the less important end. The most important end is mental harmony.

. . . marriage is a human society . . . all human society must proceed from the mind rather than the body, else it would be but a kind of animal or beastish meeting; if the mind, therefore cannot have that due







company by marriage that it may reasonably and humanly desire, that marriage can be no human society but a certain formality.<sup>21</sup>

God is no deceitful giver, to bestow that on us for a remedy of loneliness which if it bring not a sociable mind as well as a conjunctive body, leaves us no less alone than before.<sup>22</sup>

It is only from the mind "whence must flow the acts of peace and love"<sup>23</sup> that make a happy marriage. A woman, then, is not a fit wife unless her intellect is sufficient to satisfy the demands of her husband's mind and her emotions deep enough to comprehend and match his own feelings.

Milton's definition of marriage is that:

Marriage is a divine institution joining man and woman in a love fitly disposed to the helps and comforts of domestic life.<sup>24</sup>

Milton elaborates on the definition by explaining the duties of the marriage partners: their first concern is to give mutual help to one another in their religious devotion to God; next to this they must nurture "civil fellowship of love and amity"<sup>25</sup> both between themselves and their fellowmen; following that, they must turn their attention toward generation and household affairs for, after all, one, though not the prime, purpose of marriage was procreation; only last was the couple concerned with the "remedy of incontinence." Milton's definition of marriage shows that this "love" and these "helps and comforts" are mutual and intended for the benefit of the wife as well as for the husband. Even the title of Milton's first divorce pamphlet speaks of divorce as "restored to the good of both sexes." Both husband and wife were obliged to conduct themselves so as to assure the happiness and benefit of marriage to each other, the husband as the head of the house, and the wife as the help-mate:



[it is necessary] that the husband bear himself as the head and preserver of his wife instructing her to all goodness and integrity of life; that the wife also be to her husband a help, according to her place, especially furthering him in the true worship of God, and next in all the occasions of civil life.<sup>26</sup>

Milton used the Pauline image of likening the relation of husband and wife to that of Christ and the Church. The wife must honor and obey her husband as the church honors and obeys Christ, her head. But the husband, too, has a duty in that he must love and cherish his wife as Christ loves and cherishes His church.<sup>27</sup> From such a relationship comes the full end of marriage wherein the communication of all duties both divine and human is achieved with utmost benevolence and affection existing between man and woman.

Milton reinterpreted St. Paul's statement that "it is better to marry than to burn" by explaining what this burning means. For Milton "burn" did not mean sexual desire, carnal lust, but a "pure and more inbred desire" which God put into Adam in Paradise before he knew the sin of incontinence: this was "the desire and longing to put off an unkindly solitariness by uniting another body, but not without a fit soul to his in cheerful society of wedlock."<sup>28</sup> With this kind of statement Milton returns to his major thesis in dealing with the subject of marriage—only the uniting with another compliant mind constitutes a true marriage. Milton did not take an anti-sexual view of marriage but, quite the contrary, a supra-sexual view of it.

For Milton there was no true marriage if the partners' minds were not by nature compliant. Compassion demanded dissolution of such a marriage because of the misery it would bring. To endeavour to force





together unlikes was, for Milton, to oppose God, nature and reason. Milton's theory of divorce is, then, based on a conception according to which the union of two individuals in a marriage contract should take place only between those whose natures are mutually attractive, and this union should be continued only so long as the natures of husband and wife remain harmonious.<sup>29</sup>

The question of individual liberty, hence divorce, which was so important to Milton was not seriously put forward by any Puritans before him. The Puritans were bent upon avoiding trouble if they could, but determined to endure it if they could not. As far as the Puritan husband was concerned, "First, he must choose his love and then he must love his choice; this is the oyle which maketh all things easie."<sup>30</sup> The Puritan preachers were prepared to believe that love was irresistible as well as blind. Adam and Eve were transfixed by love in paradise. Marriages were made in heaven. Lovers were brought together by the finger of God. "It was God that first gave Adam his wife; and it is God that giveth every man his wife to this day."<sup>31</sup> Like other Puritans Milton emphasized that marriages were made in heaven; they were made by "the natural and plain order of Gods institution" and therefore marriage was a "divine institution."<sup>32</sup> But what happens to the man whose wife God gave him turns out to be the kind of blessing which happens also to be a cross? The Puritan answer was that it was the husband's obligation to love the woman God gave him and never to complain even though she came far short of fulfilling all her obligations to him. The reasoning for such an answer was that if man is endowed with





greater natural gifts and authority, he is so endowed because he has a greater burden to bear. He must rule—a task much harder than to obey—and therefore he must love, come what may. Very few preachers were willing to conclude simply that the hand of God was exhibited in a marriage when the parties devoted themselves to the satisfaction of one another's need for companionship and love, but the hand of God was not present when such a satisfaction was not forthcoming, therefore the two were not joined, must part and might seek elsewhere the satisfaction they required.<sup>33</sup>

Puritans before Milton were not prepared to go so far in the logic of individualism. But Milton made his reasoned position clear: if either marriage partner was a burden God did not ordain that this burden be carried through life. God's intention was that marriage become a prevention of loneliness to the mind and spirit of man. If this could not be supplied by either marriage partner, there could be no true marriage and both parties were free:

. . .it is a work more worthy the care and consultation of God to provide for the worthiest part of man, which is his mind, and not unnaturally to set it beneath the formalities and respects of the body . . .: I say we may conclude that such a marriage, wherein the mind is so disgraced and vilified below the body's interest . . . is not of God's institution, and therefore no marriage.<sup>34</sup>

Milton's opinion was not one with the prevailing Puritan stand.<sup>35</sup> The converse of the injunction "choose your love" was "love your choice," and that was what the Puritan marriage partner was urged to do.

What is most relevant to this thesis in the divorce tracts is that in discussing divorce Milton makes it quite clear that the wife has equal rights with the husband:



If divorce were granted . . . to release afflicted wives certainly it is not only a dispensation, but a most merciful law: and why it should not yet be in force, being wholly as needful, I know not what can be in cause but senseless cruelty.<sup>36</sup>

Unfortunately, writers on divorce and on the life of Milton often incorrectly state that he did not give consideration to the wife. Not only did he give attention to her in his own writings, but he directed the attention of his readers to her by emphasizing her rights which previously, in fact, had been little observed. For Milton, with regard to divorce, woman was in no way subordinate to man or subject to his arbitrary dismissal. She was granted the same rights of divorce as was the husband.

There was one more way that Milton emphasized the equality of woman with man. Man and woman were equal in sin and in their appointed inheritance of death, therefore they were heirs together of the grace of life. The husband had no better title to salvation than the wife who submitted to him, hence the godly wife could be certain that there would be a balance in heaven. This was not a new doctrine put forward by Milton; Puritan preachers had stated it before. But with Milton's emphasis upon woman's importance to man, his emphasis upon her being a companion for him, the idea of her spiritual equality with him received more emphasis as well and inadvertently seemed to lessen the gap in her social inequality with him.

Milton's divorce tracts are primarily treatises on love and marriage, revealing his assumptions and showing how completely he had absorbed current Puritan ideas on the subject, while pressing them to extreme conclusions. Milton's authority for the doctrine of marriage and divorce was the scriptures; this also was the authority of the







Puritan divines. What Milton and Puritan preachers alike were trying to show was that the indispensable end of marriage was less to relieve the body and beget children, and more to console the spirit. They were concerned with showing that the essential constituents of a marital union were not authority and subjection, but rather sympathy and love. The ideal woman for both Puritans and Milton alike was the industrious and wise "treasure" in the thirty-first chapter of Proverbs. Milton, like the Puritans, stressed woman's essential role as companion and help-mate for her husband, but where Milton added emphasis, which the Puritan preachers did not, was upon woman's role as intellectual companion to her husband. Milton's ideal woman was a perfect complement for her husband as she was not only his help-mate but on a par intellectually with him.

Milton held to the prevailing doctrine that wives should be subject to their husbands, but the wife was far from being under the sway of a despot; when finding her husband not a fit partner—in a marriage "where the mind is vilified below the body's interest"—the wife had the privileges of a free Christian and had the remedy of divorce. Milton undoubtedly believed that the wife should follow rather than lead. She was the image and companion of man, as man, through holiness and wisdom, was the image of God. She was to be loved by her husband as the Church is loved by Christ, and she must obey her husband as the Church obeys Christ.

For Milton, woman had important roles to play; the greatest of these was her role as mental and spiritual companion to her husband.



With the emphasis Milton put upon man's importance—his liberty and his responsibility—the idea that woman was created for man and in his image made her a vital individual in the whole scheme of life.



## CHAPTER III

### MILTON'S ATTITUDE TOWARD WOMAN as it APPEARS in HIS MAJOR POEMS

Factors which inform Milton's attitude toward woman—Puritan tradition, biography, early education, sonnets and elegies, divorce tracts—have already been assessed. This chapter will attempt to examine his attitude as it is given artistic expression in the major poems, *Comus*, *Paradise Lost*, and *Samson Agonistes*. It should be noted that the three poems do not all represent Milton's maturity. *Comus* was written at the time of the youthful sonnets and elegies and some time before the divorce tracts with their thoughtful consideration of the status of woman in marriage. The other two subjects of this chapter are, of course, the products of his maturity.

As a Puritan, Milton believed that whatever efforts man makes salvation comes ultimately to him only through the extension of grace from God. Nothing that any man of his own actions is able to do can remove the universal imputation of sin. But now comes grace. By sin man surrendered his freedom, and therefore left it solely to God whether to save him or not as He might freely choose. God chose to do so in the person of Christ, who, taking upon himself the nature of man, atoned for all the sin of man. We are saved therefore by believing in Christ and in the sufficiency of his righteousness. Grace is made available by God to all men through Christ and man has the freedom to chose this available grace through accepting Christ; in effect through faith in him. Consequently the manifestation of grace in an individual is faith and





this faith is continually reaffirmed by the rejection of temptation.

Milton used *Comus* to examine the Puritan pattern of salvation.<sup>1</sup> But the pattern described above was not one which Milton arbitrarily imposed upon his material; it arose organically from his view of life, from his concept of the necessary struggle for true goodness. When Milton came to write *Comus* this pattern was given artistic form and the masque became a dramatization of true virtue. Essentially, then, what Milton brought with him to the writing of *Comus* was his Puritan background. There is evidence of other influences, which will be considered later, but the fundamental one is the Puritan.

The major episode in *Comus* is the trial of the Lady in Comus's palace. Milton has taken great pains to prepare for the scene by making clear the issues involved, and by foretelling the severity of her temptation through his description of the strong personal charm, active wit and effective magic powers of Comus. To achieve the desired sense of conflict Milton has carefully built up the strength of the Lady so that even Comus feels the power of her spirituality. But the Lady, when confronting Comus in the palace, proves herself immune to temptation, by stoutly countering Comus's arguments and by refusing his cordial julep. Having thus done enough by her own efforts, the next event is the consequent approach of God for the extension of grace. The miraculous event which signifies this is the appearance of Sabrina. Since the special focus of the Lady's temptation is chastity, it is proper that a guardian of chastity be her liberator, to vindicate her chastity. The approach of God is clearly indicated: the Lady's words to Comus "are set off by some superior power";<sup>2</sup> Comus feels stricken with a "cold shudd'ring dew";<sup>3</sup> and the notice of God's presence is further enforced by the reference to Jove. The



miracle of liberation follows, and the Lady and Attendant Spirit depart "while heaven lends us grace."<sup>4</sup>

Once it is seen how Milton's pattern for salvation is followed by the Lady it is easier to determine the importance to the struggle of her individual nature as a woman. For example, haemony protects the brothers against Comus but not directly the Lady herself; she must proceed through her trial on her own powers. In her trial the Lady manifests the capacity for positive, conquering virtue. She must not only refuse Comus's offers, but must actually defeat him, as she does. The Lady shows the most steadfast and perceptive virtue and it is not even slightly swayed or deceived by Comus's pleas and arguments. From the first Milton has portrayed the Lady as a highly spiritual person (ll.244 ff.) and above common lusts and pleasures (ll.170 ff.). Presumably Milton intended the interpretation that Comus realized from the start, that physical temptation would not affect the Lady and that he must strike at her through her mind. Thus Comus makes his attack on the high plane of argument. But the Lady defeats Comus in this argument, for she has both moral strength and intellectual perception.

And the Lady has something else. She has faith, and because she has faith she accepts and has grace. Grace appears, in the form of Sabrina, at the end of the masque, not as a reward for virtue or steadfastness, but as the expression of the ultimate result of the Lady's faith. It is the revelation of what the Lady's faith finally implies: that she has been sustained by the grace offered through faith. Sabrina's arrival is reserved until the end in order to fulfil Milton's need for a dramatic conclusion to the poem. In fact though, the argument of the poem, because of the dilemma of imposing an art form on an abstract theological idea, is







circular: grace comes to the Lady because she is virtuous, but she is virtuous because she has accepted grace.

Milton compliments women generally by way of the Lady. Her own virtuous character was essential to her struggle and she is to be admired for this. She possesses other most admirable characteristics: her mind is unassailable and she has spiritual strength. She is characterized by reason and trust and is the manifestation of positive and effective virtue. In the final analysis, however, she has no personal identity, apart from her doctrinal role, which would reveal Milton's attitude toward woman. Her virtues are dictated by the pattern of salvation rather than by a desire to characterize a woman.

Other elements enter into *Comus*, but these, too, seem to reveal more about Milton's philosophical and doctrinal interests than his attitude toward woman. Even though she is not humanized, the Lady is made to appear very beautiful. The appearance of the Lady reflects the beautiful women of Milton's early sonnets and elegies. Comus, upon first seeing the Lady, is stunned by her "enchanting ravishment." It is part of Comus's argument for enticing the Lady that he emphasize her appearance. "Beauty is nature's coin," and "nature's brag, and must be shown/ In courts, at feasts . . . / Where most may wonder at the workmanship."<sup>5</sup> It is the young Milton of the elegies and sonnets that one becomes aware of in the description of this beautiful Lady, for she is admired by Milton, but only from a distance.

When the Elder Brother speaks of the chastity of the Lady he echoes what Milton had learned from Plato concerning the soul and its outward appearance.<sup>6</sup> The Brother says:

So dear to Heav'n is Saintly chastity,  
That when a soul is found sincerely so,









fication of virtue in Milton's discussion of the Platonic concept of the body being a reflection of the mind and in his whole treatment of Christian chastity. The Lady, however, is not a woman imaginatively created from Milton's experience with women. She is not the womanly ideal of the divorce tracts, nor is she personalized or humanized as are Eve and Dalila.

In *Paradise Lost* Milton attempted to create an Eve who would be the embodiment of all the womanly attributes discussed up to this point. She would reflect the ideals of beauty which Milton expressed in his youthful poetry; she would possess the virtues which the Lady of *Comus* possessed; she would have the qualities of the perfect Puritan wife and the compatibility of the wifely helpmate of the divorce tracts. Eve would play a part in the study of a true and permanent marriage, yet one that included human error and suffering.

Eve is created as a very beautiful woman. She fits the portrait of the typical Petrarchan ideal which Milton knew well. She has poise, softness, grace and golden curls. She is the fulfilment of Adam's ideal and he describes his reaction to her and appraisal of her:

Under his forming hands a Creature grew  
 Manlike, but different in sex, so lovely fair,  
 That what seem'd fair in all the World, seem'd now  
 Mean, or in her summ'd up, in her contain'd  
 And in her looks, which from that time infus'd  
 Sweetness into my heart, unfelt before,  
 And into all things from her Air inspir'd  
 The spirit of love and amorous delight.  
 (VIII, 470-77)

But this beautiful fulfilment of a dream is more than the classically beautiful female figure of Milton's sonnets and elegies. Eve is warm,





personal, individualized and very human, "Grace was all in her steps, Heav'n in her eyes/ In every gesture dignity and love" (VIII, 487-88). The emotions Adam feels for Eve are human, sincere emotions because of the kind of person she appears to be:

. . . . here passion first I felt,  
 Commotion strange, in all enjoyments else  
 Superior and unmov'd here only weak.  
 (VIII, 530-33)

Through his intuitive knowledge Adam was aware that this creation he beheld was inferior to him "in mind and inward faculties" and in some measure less perfect than he in her resemblance to God (VIII, 538-46), but his awareness soon gave place to his infatuation with her other perfections. He expressed to Raphael his sense of Eve's superiority through her beauty:

. . . . yet when I approach  
 Her loveliness, so absolute she seems  
 And in herself complete, so well to know  
 Her own, that what she wills to do or say,  
 Seems wisest, virtuousest, discreetest, best;  
 . . . . .  
 Greatness of mind and nobleness thir seat  
 Build in her loveliest, and create an awe  
 About her, as a guard angelic plac't.  
 (VIII, 545-59)

Because of her beauty Eve appears as a more wonderful gift than Adam had dreamed of.

Milton was quite capable of appreciating the aesthetic appeal of a beautiful woman. He had felt the immediate attraction to "groups of radiant girls with divinely lovely faces"<sup>10</sup> which he wrote of in the elegies and "the gentle and beautiful lady"<sup>11</sup> of some of the sonnets. He had learned of beauty from Plato, and besides this the Puritan divines had suggested, with some qualifications, that a beautiful wife was something of a gift. When Milton came to describe Eve he thus could combine



all of what he had learned of beauty with what he had experienced personally, to form an Eve who has a completeness which makes her infinitely believable.

Like the Lady of *Comus*, Eve plays a part in elaborating a doctrinal argument: she is essential to Milton's portrayal of temptation, the Fall, and regeneration of the fallen individual. However, unlike the Lady, who exists primarily to serve the doctrinal theme, Eve achieves a much more complex existence through her role as wife. Milton has given her an independent womanhood, independent experiences and choices, and made her responsible for her own actions, but combined with this, like the ideal Puritan wife, Eve is required to obey her husband, be companion to him, and work toward the betterment of them both within their marriage bond. Unlike the Lady, who is a paragon of virtue in the face of temptation, Eve succumbs to temptation, bringing the downfall of herself and her husband, but she is given the capacity for the regeneration of herself, her husband, and all of mankind.

The first thing that is obvious about Eve when Milton introduces her is her difference from Adam and her wifely role of subordination:

Two of far nobler shape erect and tall  
 Godlike erect, with native Honor clad  
 In naked Majesty seem'd Lords of all,  
 And worthy seem'd, for in their looks Divine  
 The image of thir glorious Maker shone,  
 Truth, Wisdom, Sanctitude severe and pure,  
 Severe, but in truth filial freedom plac't;  
 Whence true authority in men; though both  
 Not equal, as thir sex not equal seem'd;  
 For contemplation hee and valor fram'd,  
 For softness shee and sweet attractive Grace,  
 Hee for God only, shee for God in him:  
 His fair large Front and Eye sublime declar'd  
 Absolute rule;

(IV, 287-301)





Adam is formed for "contemplation" and valor, Eve for "softness" and "sweet attractive grace." Adam is the intellectual one, the rational one, Eve the lovely one, the revelation of sweet simplicity and innocence, the inferior one. The line "Hee for God only, she for God in him" implies a natural hierarchy of the existence on earth of Adam and Eve. Adam exists for God's purpose and glory; Eve for God's glory through Adam. This relationship is founded, not on an unsound concept of man's position, but on mutual esteem, with a rational recognition of the superior authority of man. This differentiation between Adam and Eve is carried through the length of the poem and it is Milton's expression of the bond he shares with all seventeenth-century expositors of the place of woman: that she is a little below man in the great chain of being. This concept is also a very definite reflection of Puritan doctrine on the place of woman. Milton is only poetically restating what was prosaically a very popular idea.

Part of the idea of Eve's subordination comes from the facts of her creation: she was created after Adam and from one of his ribs. This idea was stressed a great many times by early Christians to explain the doctrine of woman's inferiority and her inherent weakness.<sup>12</sup> This doctrine meant to the early Christians that woman was also morally inferior to man and inherently more sinful. Milton agreed with the idea of woman's creation after and from man, but he in no way suggested that this made her evil. Adam tells Eve that he gave her being from a rib out of his side, but a rib "nearest my heart." Eve was therefore always to remain a part of Adam because she was of his flesh and bone. She was a most desirable "other half", for she was a companion to Adam instead of a burden.



Eve is quite aware of her own subordination; she acknowledges Adam as her head and this results in concord between the two:

God is thy Law, thou mine: to know no more  
Is woman's happiest knowledge and her praise.<sup>13</sup>  
(IV.635-38)

It is to be expected that Adam, with his greater rational power, and his greater physical strength and courage, should be the head of the family. As in the pamphlets on divorce, so in *Paradise Lost*, the husband is represented as holding the superior position. This is alluded to not only by Milton in his own person but by the angels Raphael, Michael, and after the fall the Judge himself points out to Adam his proper place. After Adam relates to Raphael what he remembers since his own creation, particularly the creation and subsequent attraction for him of the beautiful Eve, Adam is admonished by Raphael. In his rebuke Raphael states that Adam must not be overcome by passion but must exercise wisdom and reason in relation to Eve;

. . . . of that skill the more thou knows't  
The more she will acknowledge thee her head.  
(VIII,572-73)

Eve is reminded of her wifely position again, in a final way, by Michael as he declares to her and Adam that they can no longer abide in Paradise:

Thy Husband, him to follow thou art bound;  
Where he abides, think there thy native soil.  
(XI,291-92)

The inferior position of woman is not, indeed, mentioned in the institution of marriage by the Almighty,<sup>14</sup> though Adam says he is well aware that Eve is inferior "in the prime end of nature."<sup>15</sup> However, God severely condemns Adam after the fall for giving up his place of superiority and subjecting himself to Eve (X, 145-56).

Like the good Puritan wife, Eve truly acknowledges obedience to be





her first duty, and also like the Puritan wife even though she is less than her husband, she is regarded very highly. This elevation of woman was stressed by Milton, but it was not unique to him. Puritan divines before Milton insisted upon subordination of woman to man, but in the next breath they insisted upon her importance to him: "Though the man be as the head, yet is the woman as the heart, which is the most excellent part of the body next the head, farre more excellent then any other member under the head, and almost equall to the head in many respects, and as necessary as the head."<sup>16</sup> Woman was made for man, Puritans and Milton agreed, but she was made very little inferior to him because she was made to complement him.

As complement to Adam, Eve was to be not so much his rational equal as the source of his intellectual companionship:

Of fellowship I speak  
Such as I seek, fit to participate  
All rational delight.

(VIII,389-91)

Eve is created for Adam according to what Milton had already stressed very strongly in the divorce tracts: woman was to be an apt and cheerful conversant with man, in order to comfort him against the evils of a solitary life. Although Eve is created inferior to Adam in rational power, she is certainly not lacking in it. At the conclusion of a highly poetical speech by Adam about night and day, rest and work, the following day's endeavors, Eve raises the question of the purpose of the stars (IV,657). Again, after her troublesome dream (V,30-128) Adam cheers her by giving her an explanation of it in terms of dream psychology. When Raphael relates the narrative of the war in heaven, Eve listens attentively with Adam. These speeches serve several purposes: as instruction for





Eve (which has larger implications in the whole theme of Eve's part in the Fall), as emphasis upon Eve's place in the scheme of things, that is, below Adam and therefore guided by him, and an indication of her rational capacity to understand what was explained to her. However, when Eve perceives Adam "entring on studious thoughts abstruse," she rises and goes "forth among her Fruits and Flowers." Milton specifically states that it is not because Eve lacks the rational capacity to understand what Raphael will narrate, nor is it because she is disinterested, it is rather that she prefers that Adam tell her because she knows he

. . . . would intermix  
Grateful digressions, and solve high dispute  
With conjugal caresses.

(VIII, 54-56)

Eve's desire argues a dependence on Adam and she recognizes her primary and proper responsibility: companionship for Adam. She wants to hear of these things of the cosmic sphere in her capacity as wife-companion to Adam, not as just another listener to Raphael.

One of the signs of Adam's divinely inspired wisdom in the eyes of Milton and his predecessors was Adam's ability to name the animals as is related in Genesis 2.20. As an appropriate balance to this Milton assigns to Eve an equally worthy function, *not suggested in Scripture*, of naming the flowers (XI, 277). Raphael, when Adam appears too much moved by Eve's physical beauty, gives counsel: "What higher in her society thou findest/ Attractive, human, rational, love still." (VIII, 586-87). In the divorce tracts, Milton had emphasized woman's rationality. In *Paradise Lost*, Eve, the ideal womanly companion, is given a rational capacity that complements Adam's.



Eve is endowed with the gifts of refinement, beauty, influence, passion and grace. When these gifts are "under government" she becomes the ideal Puritan wife. She indicates her station as wife when she replies to Adam:

My Author and Disposer; that thou bidd'st  
Unargu'd I obey; so God ordains,

. . . . .  
With thee conversing I forget all time.

(IV, 635-39)

She labors at Adam's side in the work of the garden and the task of tending and pruning it is not "toilsome" effort, but "sweet task" because both husband and wife aid each other. She looks after the provision of food for her husband, herself and their guest, Raphael. Eve is the perfect homemaker and lives up to Milton's idea that "nothing lovelier can be found in woman than to studie household good" (IX, 233).

Eve worships with her husband. Like Puritans, she and Adam pray, standing and extemporaneously praising God with no set postures, phrases or rites. With Adam she mentions the wonders and bliss of creation, the mutual help one has given the other and the mutual love which crowns the whole situation. They are the poetic examples of what Milton has prosaically stated in the *Tetrachordon*: "that in matrimony there must be. . . a mutual help to piety."<sup>17</sup> Eve furthers her husband in his obedience to his religious duty.

In the same place in the *Tetrachordon* where Milton mentions religious duty within marriage he also mentions the duty of "civil fellowship of love and amity" that it includes. Eve grants her loved spouse, and takes a desiring part in, the beauties of the connubial state. The happy pair had neither doubt nor guilt in their lovemaking and Eve did not refuse "the rights/ Mysterious of connubial love. . . .(IV, 742-43).





Milton attached no sin or blame to the union of these lovers. He did not believe that the pleasure of the sex act was evil and a result of the Fall, but quite the contrary. His view of sex is related to his philosophy of matter. He believed all matter was good, hence there was no distinction between body and soul, flesh and spirit. The body was just as potentially good as the soul, and therefore the union of two bodies in the sex act was not necessarily evil. Because of this one was free to obey God's will in body as well as to obey Him in spirit.

Obedience to the will of God in body meant procreation. Generation was a duty to God and Adam and Eve were well aware of their duty: they were to begin "a Race/ To fill the Earth" (IV, 732-33), which would extol the infinite goodness of God.

Our Maker bids increase, who bids abstain  
But our Destroyer, foe to God and Man.  
Hail wedded Love, mysterious Law, true source  
Of human offspring. . . .

(IV, 748-52)

Eve, as mother of mankind, fulfils the role of Puritan wife in that she willingly complies with "what God declares/ Pure, and commands to some" (IV, 746-47).

Eve has perfectly justified her creation. She is the image of the ideal Puritan wife and her every deed has met a divorce tract specification for the ideal wife: she has been, in her "apt and cheerful conversation" a refreshment against Adam's solitude; she has tended efficiently to her household affairs. Besides this she has supplied, and enjoyed also, the fellowship of love and is aware of her duty to God to procreate. Adam praises her in speech that echoes the divorce tracts:

Neither her out-side form'd so fair, nor aught  
In procreation common to all kinds



(Though higher of the genial Bed by far,  
 And with mysterious reverence I deem)  
 So much delights me, as those graceful acts,  
 Those thousand decencies that daily flow  
 From all her words and actions, mixt with Love  
 And sweet compliance, which declare unfeign'd  
 Union of Mind, or in us both one Soul;  
 (VIII, 596-604)

The perfect state of Adam and Eve in the garden could not, as Milton well knew, exist in the normal world. Yet he did believe that relationships of this world could exist in proportion to their paradisaical quality. The dramatic picture he presents before the Fall, then, is one of the calm of mutual love, but it also contains the elements of the storm threatening wholly to wreck the affection of Adam and Eve, and in the course of it Adam bitterly attacks Eve and her sex.

On the day of her fall, Eve begins peacefully performing her share of the reciprocal obligations of husband and wife as she and Adam commune "how that day they best may ply their growing work." She is submissive, cheerful, constant and dutiful, but she proposes that they labor apart in order to best complete the large amount of work they have to do. Adam endeavors to dissuade her<sup>18</sup> but the essence of all obedience is in willingness, so Adam does not attempt to win his point. As a perfect husband he duplicates in his matrimonial bearings towards Eve God's attitude towards him, and says, "go, for thy stay not free absents thee more" (IX, 372). Adam compels Eve's love and obedience as little as God compels his.

Eve parts from Adam and is confronted by the serpent as she works alone. She succumbs to his argument<sup>19</sup> and eats of the forbidden tree. She returns to Adam and persuades him to eat of the fruit; he does, "not deceiv'd but fondly overcome with Female charm" (IX, 999). The false





fruit operates on them both, inflaming their carnal desire, shaming them in the face of God, and causing disunity between them. The situation between Adam and Eve after the Fall is most useful, by way of contrast, to show what has happened to the harmony of the ideal marriage.

Eve blames Adam, for the very liberality and freedom he had granted her; he was "too facile" and did not as the head command her "absolutely not to go." Eve's love for Adam has been replaced by pride and her confidence in him has changed to fear. Overtrusting Eve, Adam had allowed her to control the fate of both. Eve, on the other hand, by persisting in her course to labor alone against the persuasions of Adam, had broken the harmony of their married state. The whole marriage situation in Paradise is instantly reversed. Eve, under the spell of pride, assumes the mastery; Adam under that of romantic passion has become the slave. Lust replaces love. When they have eaten of the forbidden fruit and the false happiness it produced has been exhausted, Adam and Eve realize that their innocence is gone. Lust ends in bitter recrimination. They display passions of anger, hate, mistrust, suspicion and discord: ". . . they in mutual accusation spent/ The fruitless hours" (IX, 1187-88).

Adam attempts to justify to God his previous actions. The rebuke he receives is in fact a summary statement by Milton of the place of woman:

Was shee thy God, that her thou didst obey  
Before his voice, or was shee made thy guide,  
Superior, or but equal, that to her  
Thou didst resign thy Manhood, and the Place  
Wherein God set thee above her made of thee,  
And for thee, whose perfection far excell'd  
Hers in all real dignity: Adorn'd  
She was indeed, and lovely to attract





Thy Love, not thy Subjection, and her Gifts  
 Were such as under Government well seem'd,  
 Unseemly to bear rule, which was thy part  
 And person, hadst thou known thyself aright.  
 (X, 145-156)

Adam is reminded that he was made the superior creature; that it was he, as intended in the hierarchial scheme of the world, who was assigned to command. The idea of wifely submission is emphasized in *Paradise Lost* as a part of Eve's punishment when she is told "and to thy Husband's will/Thine shall submit" (X, 195-6). The idea of woman's inferiority and submission, however, has been continuously stressed from the beginning of the epic, and it here seems to lose its force as punishment. Eve's obedience to Adam, though, is no longer voluntary.

Eve has by now played her part as wife, and, simultaneously, her part in elaborating a doctrinal argument: she has been tempted and fallen, bringing down not only herself but her husband. She now becomes paramount in Milton's examination of the theme of regeneration. In working out the theme she again exemplifies the ideal wife and her encounter with a despairing and lamenting Adam begins her rehabilitation. She comes with soft words and is violently reproved.<sup>20</sup> Adam catalogues her faults and failings—her deceitfulness, vanity, willfulness, assumed superiority—in contrast to those virtues which, as ideal wife, were supposed to be hers, namely constancy, wisdom, submission, maturity. Feeling her evil, she is sorry and begs Adam's forgiveness and God's. In spite of Adam's selfish outburst, she would not abandon him when told to leave him. She "at his feet fell humble" and "besought his peace." In her supplication she declares her love, recognizing her dependency on Adam, and insists on the necessity of union between them. Rehabilitation commences in contrition and confession. Eve needs Adam's aid, counsel, support, compassion, and reaccept-



ance; according to her place in creation she submits her fate perfectly to his.

. . . both have sinned, but thou  
Against God onely, I against God and thee,  
And to the place of judgment will return,  
There with my cries importune Heaven, that all  
The sentence from thy head remov'd may light  
On me, sole cause to thee of all this woe.

(X, 930-935)

Made for God through Adam, her regeneration cannot proceed without reconciliation to him. She offers the only possible restitution: submission and assumption of all guilt. Her recognition that she is entitled to no consideration creates the atmosphere in which Adam can feel again. What he feels is their identity in each other. He gives her renewed love and tenderness.

But rise, let us no more contend, nor blame  
Each other, blamed enough elsewhere, but strive  
In offices of love, how we may light'n  
Each others burden in our share of woe.

(X, 958-61)

The balance of the ideal marriage has been restored. Eve assumes her wifely role, the two recognize their common situation and the union between them. They accept one another fully in this new situation and share a companionship as they had before the fall.<sup>21</sup> Eve's duty of procreation is emphasized: mankind is to be restored through the seed of Eve (XI, 115).<sup>22</sup> A kind of cycle has been completed. Milton's Eve has attempted, even though deceived, to rise above her created status and thus brings discord and chaos into the world. Only when she returns to her rightful place, and Adam mounts again to his, are peace and harmony restored.

All the feminine foibles, follies and failures of woman are present in the person of Eve: she is guilty of false reasoning, self-absorption, self-deception, willfulness, guillibility. But on the other







hand, Milton also shows in Eve modesty, innocence, goodness, amiability, sweetness, humility, and beauty. The opinions of Milton are not to be found in the angry words of the fallen Adam, but, on the contrary, they are to be found in the honourable place he gives Eve. Though subordinate to her husband, she is under no despotic sway. If she is inferior in rational power, in other gifts, equally valuable, she is superior. She does possess that "greatness of mind" that Milton so much desired and admired in woman. She is "divinely fair, fit Love for God." If the guilt of the first transgression is attached to her, so too is attached the honor of man's recovery. Much of Milton's ideal of marriage appears in her relations with Adam; except for the breach after the Fall—soon healed—they are throughout united "in love and mutual honor," together forming a whole.

*Paradise Lost* presents a three-dimensional picture of Eve that reveals Milton's basic admiration for woman. She is more than the idealized but psychologically vague woman of his early sonnets and elegies; she is also more than the unadorned, wifely companion whom he describes in the divorce tracts. She is a synthesis of these two views of woman and distinctly human because she is subject to all the virtues and weaknesses of her sex. Above all Eve is the ideal wife: not only is she physically beautiful, but she also has an inner beauty of mind and soul which manifests itself in her outward grace and goodness.

Milton's views as set down in the character of Eve seem in keeping with his Puritan training and the teaching of the domestic conduct books. Thus Eve exemplifies all the virtues of the ideal marital companion as Milton, according to his Puritan beliefs, has described them in the divorce



pamphlets. Chilton Powell notes: "Perhaps Eve, in the latter part of *Paradise Lost*, where she appears as a real helpmate to her husband, presents the best contemporary picture of what it was thought, from the latter part of the sixteenth to the latter part of the seventeenth century, a wife should be."<sup>23</sup>

In her person, through her speech and actions before the Fall, Eve is the exemplar of St. Paul's statement of woman's inferior place: "But I would have you know, that the head of every man is Christ; and the head of the woman is the man" (Corinthians, XI, 3). According to Milton woman definitely has a rightful place in the scheme of creation, proper recognition of which will contribute a certain peace and order. That place is to "comfort and refresh mankind." Though Milton stressed the intellectual status of the ideal companion in marriage, he also stressed her capacity for giving service. If this latter attitude seems harsh to our age, it called for no apology from a seventeenth-century Puritan who firmly believed that woman had her "not equal" place and should keep it. But Milton's ideal wife was not a drudge though she might devote much attention to the affairs of the household. In the *Tetrachordon* Milton writes: "Man is not to hold her as a servant, but receive her into a part of that empire, which God proclaims him to, though not equally yet largely, as his own image and glory: for it is no small glory to him, that a creature so like him should be made subject to him."<sup>24</sup>

As she serves in the theme of rehabilitation Eve occasions the regeneration of both herself and Adam. While she copes with the chaos she has caused, it is when she is dejected that she most fulfils the subtle function Milton sees her created for. Adam restores the fallen





Eve, and he restores a precious balance within the universe; when he pities her he receives responsibility. Eve is the occasion of his choice and change. She softens and humanizes her husband in order to elevate him. In Adam's reacceptance, Eve too recovers balance. She says:

. . . but now lead on;  
 In me is no delay; with thee to goe  
 Is to stay here; without thee here to stay,  
 Is to go hence unwilling; thou to me  
 Art all things under Heaven, all places thou . . .  
 (XII, 614-18)

These are Eve's last lines before she leaves Paradise and therefore a statement of her created position as woman as Milton saw it.

Dalila, in *Samson Agonistes*, is the most obviously uncomplimentary of Milton's portraits of women. She is unequivocally evil and Samson's estimate of her has often been used as clear evidence of Milton's misogyny. Taking words out of context from a dramatic poem, however, is always dangerous and in this case implies that Milton only created his characters to express his opinions. In fact, both Dalila, and Samson when he reacts against her, must be seen in terms of the central purpose of the poem: a dramatic rendering of moral regeneration. The particular doctrinal and dramatic elements of the poem guide Dalila's character and provide her most notable characteristics. Because of this it is difficult to abstract an isolated picture of her.

In *Samson Agonistes* Samson has to move from a state of moral confusion and despair to the point where he has achieved a clear moral insight and a renewed purpose. In the process of rejecting Manoa's offer of physical salvation Samson clarifies the moral issue sufficiently to accept the blame for his actions, but is left, consequently, in a state





of personal despair and guilt. It is in this state that Dalila finds him. She arouses his righteous anger when she asks him to condone, in some degree, her actions. In a sense, she offers him the temptation again to which he had previously succumbed. Because of the strength of the sense of guilt and regret with which Manoa left him, Samson's rejection of the temptations Dalila presents is strong and emphatic. Because of Dalila he can positively give active expression to his new state of awareness; he can shout to Dalila that he is not the man he was previously. His violent rejection of her becomes a chance to relieve some of the guilt he felt for his weakness in the face of her previous temptation. Through Dalila he is able to convert his new awareness of what is morally right and wrong to concrete expression. As a result of her visit he feels sufficiently sure of himself to defy Harapha in God's name, and carry out His purpose. Dalila plays a vital part in the pattern of Samson's struggle but her part is decidedly subordinated by the greater theme of regeneration. To be aware of her as a person comes second to an awareness of her as a derivative character.

Dalila is decidedly very beautiful. Her appearance is described by the chorus as she arrives before Samson. She is as another Cleopatra, gliding like a stately ship "bedecte, ornate and gay. . .with all her bravery on" (712-17).<sup>25</sup> Indeed, if she were not so beautiful her arts would probably not have succeeded so well. But her appearance before Samson is her initial blunder: she comes before him richly attired, her finery bought with Philistine gold. In this rigging she arrives at a most disadvantageous moment: Samson is at a very low point, psychologically. Dalila appears as the visible symbol of his weakness and she cannot do anything else but provoke his fury. The beauty that she once could use to



her own advantage now only brings violent rebuke.

There is another dramatic reason for the strength of Samson's fury. The chorus indicates to him that it is "Dalila thy *wife*" who comes. Even though he protests loudly in order to correct the chorus, he cannot change the fact: she *is* his wife. Milton added to the Biblical source and represented Dalila as Samson's lawful wife. This is unusual, for she is usually accepted by other writers as a harlot. What Milton intended to do was emphasize the spiritual nature of the bond between them (keeping in mind Milton's definition of marriage in the divorce tracts) in order to make the impact of betrayal stronger. Samson and Dalila were united in the sight of God and it was Dalila's wifely duty, as she was created for man, to work alongside her husband, furthering him in his religious, civil and domestic duties. Samson appeals to what should have been her knowledge of the moral traditions of his land:

Being once a wife, for me thou wast to leave  
Parents and country; nor was I their subject,  
Nor under their protection but my own,  
Thou mine, not theirs. . .

(885-88)

When Dalila offers to "tend about thee to old age," Samson replies with a comment that has as background the philosophy of the divorce tracts: "No, no, of my condition take no care;/ It fits not; thou and I long since are twain." Through her unfitness, "contrariety of mind," which comes from an unchangeable part of her nature Dalila hinders the main benefits of the conjugal society, which are solace and peace, and she cannot truly be a wife to Samson. Milton's Samson then is justified, according to his own belief, in holding that Dalila is not any longer his wife. And his anger is the greater for her presumption.

Actually Milton presents Dalila as a type of treacherous wife.





Her character is such that she cannot be a true wife, as is apparent in various ways in her deception of her husband. Her religion was so at variance with that of her husband that she bitterly opposed his beliefs. This alone was sufficient to make her an unfit wife, and, had not Samson's case been an exception, allowing him to marry a heathen for the sake of attacking the Philistines, would in itself have annulled the marriage.<sup>26</sup> She was also opposed to the God-given lifework of her husband, and hence unable to give him wifely aid. She treated him with contempt instead of respect; she displayed folly for wisdom. She violated the virtues of charity when she showed a meddling and prying disposition instead of concern. For good-will she showed possessiveness; for integrity, dishonesty; for obedience, fraud and treason. She abused the duty of wife toward husband when she was clamorous and contentious. She was more than an obstacle in Samson's good works: she frankly subverted them. She used her influence as his wife to achieve his loss of sight and utter overthrow. She herself, when Samson is adamant against her blandishments, admits as she leaves him that she has not kept "the faith of wedlock bonds."

The modern reader will perhaps see Dalila as the Chorus sees her, "a manifest Serpent" whose "eye was fixt upon reward," but it must be remembered that the Chorus is modelled after the Sophoclean chorus and is excluded from any real share in the action. Furthermore, they are far from right in all of their comments and observations. All they say serves a dramatic function echoing a reacting to Samson's state of mind. When they say that woman is

Seeming at first all heavenly under virgin veil,  
Soft, modest, meek, demure, [but]  
Once join'd, the contrary she proves, a thorn  
Intestine, far within defensive arms



A cleaving mischief, in his way to virtue  
 Adverse and turbulent, or by her charms  
 Draws him awry enslav'd  
 With dotage, and his sense deprav'd  
 To folly and shameful deeds which ruin ends.  
 (1034-1042),

it must be remembered that they are a male chorus, in total support of Samson and indignant over Dalila. Their words are hardly to be taken as a true portrait of Dalila.

Nor is it justifiable to take all of Samson's words as a true picture of his wife. There is some evidence to suggest that she is not as brazen and as hard-hearted an evil-doer as Samson thinks she is. He calls her "Hyaena;" he says she is not truly penitent, but only more cautiously, more intelligently desiring to transgress again; it is only her malice, not her repentance, that brings her to him. But taking into account Samson's anger with her for her previous actions, it seems unreasonable to expect a fair judgment from him of her present motives. Why should she want him back merely to transgress again when she is already in a position of having all she wants, without burdening herself with a blind man who obviously hates her. Her perseverance in the face of Samson's furious and often sarcastic denunciations suggests at least a partial sincerity in her desire for reconciliation. She receives the worst of each encounter, but stays, attempting again and again to wring from Samson at least a hint of forgiveness. At the very least one must look at her perseverance in this regard as some evidence of an uneasy conscience. It is only when she has failed in eliciting any kind of sympathetic response from Samson that she falls back on the wealth and adulation given her by her people.

Of her excuses, much has been said in terms of her hypocrisy.





But surely it is arbitrary to dismiss them as totally insincere. They are the reasons of a worldly and sensual woman who has succumbed, as she is careful to point out, to no worse temptation than did Samson himself. That Samson will not forgive her is only evidence of his own newly renewed moral fervor. A reader should judge Dalila from a more objective viewpoint.

Dalila must obviously be aware of the reception she would get from Samson, but she summons her courage, and with tears, "doubtful felt and, wavering resolution" she comes to him. What she pleads as reason for her coming is accurate enough in her role as wife:

. . . conjugal affection  
Prevailing over fear and timorous doubt,  
Hath led me on desirous to behold  
Once more thy face, and know of thy estate.  
(739-42)

It is unfortunate that this wifely sentiment did not flow before her betrayal. That is no reason to distrust, entirely, the sincerity of the sentiment now, however. Dalila continues her initial speech by offering to aid Samson and "light'n what thou suffer'st." She acknowledges that her offer, which is within her wifely duty, is late, yet she hopes "in some part to recompense [her] rash but more unfortunate misdeed" (746-47). Samson's rebuke characterizes her as the false wife, which she is—a betrayer, a deceiver, a breaker of vows—but his speech should be regarded as a reaction to the reminder Dalila presents at this precise moment rather than an accurate description of her character, or for that matter, rather than Milton's view of woman.

Dalila's arguments—rationalizations preferably—have plausibility. She acknowledges initially that she is guilty of the weakness of curiosity, inquisitiveness, but hastens to add they are common female faults,





"incident to all our sex." She seems to disperse her fault among all womanhood to lessen the responsibility herself, for what she did. And Samson, after all, she says, "show'dst [her] first the way," for it was weakness in him that led him to trust "woman's frailty." She claimed she was prompted by love to betray Samson, "the jealousy of Love, powerful of sway/. . .Caus'd what I did" (791-93) and she sought to keep him love's prisoner rather than wail his "absence in my widow'd bed." Her next point is that she was pressed into betraying Samson by the "Magistrates and Princes of my country." She was in fact acting against an enemy of her people through public motives. Her lines convey an assurance of having thought she was in the right. Milton intended them to be like that because he could not present his moral paradox unless he made Dalila an impressive representative of worldly demands. While her excuses are not necessarily admirable, they are very human and a reader must grant them the place in the catalogue of human reactions that they deserve. One is quite free to dislike Dalila for them, but the very human quality of them gives a depth to Dalila that is frequently ignored.

Samson will only ascribe to Dalila a largely unmotivated willfulness and propensity to evil. His own guilt and her provocative appearance at, for her, the psychologically wrong moment, make his reaction suspect. In addition, some of her excuses are plausibly powerful reasons to a worldly woman; wealth and fame are what she falls back on when she has to admit failure. Finally, the lack of any real gain for her, in his returning to her, except that of an embittered and crippled husband, suggests that the protestations of love may be sincere, or, at least, that she feels remorse for her betrayal of him.

About the very limited passage which constitutes the portrait of



Dalila then, this much can be concluded: she is, in her immorality, very subordinate to the demands of Samson's regeneration. She is not, in herself, very important. Milton was concerned primarily with creating a character who would give support to Samson's spiritual progress. And she succeeds brilliantly not because she is as unequivocally evil as Samson suggests but because Milton has given her situation and her arguments sufficient plausibility to make them a real test of Samson's regeneration, not a simple test, not simple for him to reject. Dalila, then, cannot in any sense be abstracted from *Samson Agonistes* and certainly not as evidence of Milton's opinion of women in general.





## CHAPTER IV

### CONCLUSION

For three generations prior to John Milton, Puritan preachers had been discussing love and marriage, and woman's place in these relationships. Milton's attention to the same subjects, then, was hardly unique. He, like the Puritan preachers, taught that marriage was a divine institution having as its main objects, generation, relief of concupiscence and consolation of loneliness. But it is this latter object of matrimony that was most important to Milton. For him, anything might be forgiven a partner in marriage except the failure to provide solace and companionship for the other partner. Milton believed that marriage was an inner, loving relationship between the husband and wife in which their love was intended for the mutual help and comfort of each other.

Woman, as Milton saw her, was created essentially to fill the role of helpmate in the marriage relationship. As such, she was definitely subordinate to her husband. However, the priority he enjoyed was not arbitrary but natural, owing to the fact of his prior creation; it follows, then, according to Milton and other Puritans, that woman's subordination also was natural because she was created for man, not with him. The intention behind her creation was that she complement man, not equal him. She did have some equality with man, though, as she was equal to him in the inheritance of grace. When man and woman stand before God, they are equal; man's earthly privileges do not raise his spiritual status above that of woman's.

Milton's concept of woman is fundamentally Puritan, but he succeeds



in transcending Puritan limitations because his concept is essentially more liberal and more vital. One of the more obvious instances is his treatment of beauty. Puritan divines tentatively accepted the idea that beauty was a value in a good Puritan wife, but it was suspect nonetheless. If a man was enamoured of a beautiful woman, to the exclusion of recognizing any of her other characteristics, that man had been foolishly misled and deserved the consequences if beauty happened to be the woman's only quality. Milton fully understood the temptation that beauty presented, perhaps because the awareness of it was so strong in himself.<sup>1</sup> But because of his awareness and love of the beautiful, he succeeded in creating all of his poetic women as convincingly beautiful creatures. The women of the early sonnets and elegies, however vague one may think they are, are still described idealistically, and in terms reflecting what Milton learned about beautiful women from classical poets. The Lady of *Comus* is also a very beautiful creature. Not only does she possess inward beauty, but her appearance is so pleasing that it prompts Comus to make one of his most eloquent speeches as he tries to convince the Lady that this very beauty she possesses should not be hoarded but freely enjoyed by others. One of Dalila's most potent weapons is her beauty and Eve, without intending to do so, tempts Adam by her beauty, to forget all his inherent responsibilities. The idea that woman is essentially beautiful and that this beauty is good in itself is part of Milton's classical inheritance and differs considerably from the hesitant Puritan approval of feminine beauty. His own sensuous appreciation belies the austerity and denial of which he is sometimes accused.

The womanly ideal which Milton inherited from the Puritan doctrine was one in which she was essentially a character created for a marriage





relationship. Although the Puritan preachers allowed her a degree of responsibility, their emphasis was upon her obedience in marriage, and her dependence upon the guidance of her husband. Milton expanded upon this doctrine, accepting its basic premises, but directed attention to woman's potential as an active, feeling individual, a human being characterized by the responsibilities that liberty brings.<sup>2</sup> It is as individuals free to make moral choices according to their own reason that women are essential to Milton's major poems. If, as in Eve, this reason is overcome by persuasive argument and leads her to succumb to temptation, this very act becomes material for making a new choice and Eve attains victory through trial. Dalila, too, makes her own choices: to betray and, unlike Eve, to extenuate and defend this choice. The Lady in *Comus* has the opportunity for choice also. She is ruled by reason, not desire, therefore has true liberty and acts strongly and freely on the basis of it. Milton's view of human existence is one which is kept alive by the examples of the women in his poetry: they are total persons, free to make their own choices and responsible for the outcome of these choices.

Counter, then, to a long established opinion that John Milton's concept of woman was a purely negative one which he had arrived at as a result of personal experience, an analysis of his background, his philosophy, education and experience suggests that his attitude was not negative. Instead it reflects the ability of a seventeenth-century gentleman, able to combine the cultural heritage of sixteenth-century humanism with the religious influence of seventeenth-century Puritanism, to provide a very lofty conception of womanhood. For his ideal Milton drew upon the Hebraic conception of woman's inferiority and upon the Petrarchan picture of her ultimate beauty and virtuous womanhood. To these he added the strict demands





made on woman by the Puritan preachers and the writers of domestic conduct books. All of this he blended in harmony to create a total concept of woman. Far from using his works as an outlet for misogyny, Milton expressed in them his fascination with woman's character and his admiration for her spirit.



CHAPTER I

<sup>1</sup>The definition of the term concupiscence in the context of this thesis is taken to mean sexual desire on a much more moderate scale than the undue or illicit sexual desire (lust) as the term means today. Concupiscence, for the Puritans, meant normal sexual desire, but in terms of the great emphasis upon man's spiritual being rather than his physical being, this natural desire had to be tempered.

<sup>2</sup>The injunction to establish the office of husband and wife according to scripture was especially taken to heart by Puritans who began early to seek and supply guidance on the subject in print. One book which they habitually turned to was Miles Coverdale's translation (1541) of Bullinger's *Der Christlich Eestand*. This translation served as a text book on the key places in scripture relating to marriage and as a model for later books on the same subject. The most encyclopaedic treatise of the kind, complete with Biblical references and a cross index, was William Gouge's *Of Domestical Duties* first published in 1622. There were many other writers in the period who dealt with love, marriage and the position of woman, but it was the Puritan preachers who set forth the ideal pattern of love and marriage based upon traditional Christian morality, vitalized for popular imagination in terms of the English Bible, and adapted to the new conditions in which the Puritan found himself.

<sup>3</sup>Hagar, Leah, and the various handmaidens were ignored, disapproved of or explained away by a little pious casuistry.

<sup>4</sup>See Appendix A.

<sup>5</sup>See Appendix A.

<sup>6</sup>Coverdale, *Christian State*, fol.vii.

<sup>7</sup>*Ibid.*, fol.i.

<sup>8</sup>Smith, *Preparation to Marriage*, 16.

<sup>9</sup>Perkins, *Christian Oeconomy*, 11-12.

<sup>10</sup>Milton, *Christian Doctrine*, 986.

<sup>11</sup>Milton, *Tetrachordon*, 656.

<sup>12</sup>Perkins, *Christian Oeconomy*, 10.





- <sup>13</sup>Milton, *Tetrachordon*, 662.
- <sup>14</sup>Gouge, *Domestical Duties*, 6.
- <sup>15</sup>Whately, *Bride-Bush*, 189-190.
- <sup>16</sup>Smith, *Preparative to Marriage*, 18.
- <sup>17</sup>Whately, *Care-Cloth*, 73.
- <sup>18</sup>Smith, *Preparative to Marriage*, 36.
- <sup>19</sup>Milton, *Divorce*, 583.
- <sup>20</sup>Coverdale, *Christian State*, fol.xl.
- <sup>21</sup>*Ibid.*, fol.xliv.

## CHAPTER II

<sup>1</sup>These elegies should be read in connection with a passage in the *Apology for Smectymnuus* in which Milton tells how he was first roused to literary enthusiasm by the amatory poetry of the Roman elegists and inspired to imitate them.

<sup>2</sup>Milton. Elegy VII, 60. (All quotations are from Hughes edition unless otherwise stated.)

<sup>3</sup>*Ibid.*, 58.

<sup>4</sup>Milton, *Apology*, (Hanford), 366.

<sup>5</sup>Grierson, *Cross Currents*, 245.

The clergy, however, did not emphasize this view, but more often took pains to show that no relationship existed between beauty of the body and virtue of the soul; they in fact commented that beauty more often led to sin than to purity of action and thought.

<sup>6</sup>Hanford comments that though the precise date of these sonnets is uncertain they may be taken as immediate fruit of Milton's second literary discipleship and a product of his university years, not as Masson assumed, of his Italian journey.



<sup>7</sup>The woman is not the Italian singer Leonora Baroni, as these poems belong to a period before Milton journeyed to Italy and met Leonora.

<sup>8</sup>Milton, *Apology*, 367.

<sup>9</sup>Milton was involved at this time in outlining the dramatic plans for *Paradise Lost* which continued his earlier concern with love.

<sup>10</sup>Milton devoted four pamphlets to the subject of divorce and a considerable portion of Book I, chapter 10 of his *De Doctrina Christiana*. The first of these pamphlets, *The Doctrine and Discipline of Divorce Restored to the Good of Both Sexes* appeared, according to Masson, in August 1643; there was a second and enlarged edition in February of the next year. *The Judgment of Martin Bucer Concerning Divorce* appeared in July 1644. Milton's next and longest work is *Tetrachordon*, 1645. His remaining work, published in the same month, is entitled *Colasterion*.

<sup>11</sup>Chilton L. Powell, "The Date and Occasion of Milton's First Divorce Tract" in *English Domestic Relations, 1487-1653*, gives evidence (pp.225-31) to show that the first of Milton's tracts on divorce was written so early that it "had no connection whatever with his own domestic life." It seems that Milton's interest in divorce was the result of something in addition to, and much higher than, a mere feeling that he had been injured by his wife, but I cannot wholly agree with Dr. Powell's conclusion. He overlooks Milton's own words about the divorce tracts in which Milton represents himself as moved to write of divorce partly by zeal for the public welfare and partly by the resentment at the conduct of his wife.

In spite of the fact that Milton in his Commonplace Book had jotted down copious notes on marriage and divorce for some future use, it is difficult to concede his developing and publishing these ideas almost simultaneously with his marriage to Mary Powell. It is important, therefore, to clarify the date of Milton's marriage and the date of publication of the first divorce pamphlets. Both 1642 and 1643 have been suggested and since no record of the actual marriage has been found all proof must rest upon other evidence. The first biographer to give a date 1643 for Milton's marriage was John Toland; neither Edward Phillips nor the anonymous biographer gives any date. (See B.A. Wright "Milton's First Marriage," *Modern Language Review*, XXVI, October, 1931, 383-400). All biographers are unanimous that Milton returned with his bride in the spring. By the spring of 1643, however, the political situation would have made this journey impossible since all travel and intercourse between London and Oxford was restricted (Wright, *MLR*, XXVII, 18). Furthermore, Anne Powell's testimony in 1656 that she had known her son-in-law for fourteen years would indicate the year 1642 as the possible date of marriage. (R.M. Frye: "Milton's First Marriage," *Notes and Queries*, Series 2, 1956, p.200). Accepting the spring of 1642 rather than 1643 as the date of Milton's marriage allows a full year between the marriage and the publication of *The Doctrine and Discipline of Divorce* in 1643, and as Burns Martin concludes, "does not bring us back to the old and revolting idea, with all its implications, that Milton made his divorce pamphlets on his honeymoon"





(Burns, Martin, "The Date of Milton's First Marriage," *Studies in Philosophy*, XXV, 1928, 457-461).

<sup>12</sup>Milton, *Divorce*, ed. Frank A. Patterson, p. 579.

Quotations from the divorce tracts are all found in the Patterson edition of Milton's works.

<sup>13</sup>Milton, *Divorce*, 672.

<sup>14</sup>Milton, *Tetrachordon*, 653.

<sup>15</sup>*Ibid.*, 653.

<sup>16</sup>*Ibid.*, 657.

<sup>17</sup>Milton, *Divorce*, 606.

<sup>18</sup>*Ibid.*, 578.

<sup>19</sup>*Ibid.*, 613.

<sup>20</sup>Milton, *Divorce*, 582.

<sup>21</sup>*Ibid.*, 593.

<sup>22</sup>Milton, *Tetrachordon*, 657.

<sup>23</sup>Milton, *Divorce*, 582.

<sup>24</sup>Milton, *Tetrachordon*, 664.

<sup>25</sup>*Ibid.*, 658.

<sup>26</sup>Milton, *Judgment of Martin Bucer*, 643.

<sup>27</sup>*Ibid.*, 643.

<sup>28</sup>Milton, *Divorce*, 583.

<sup>29</sup>Milton regarded marriages as ordained by God having joined woman to man in order that she would be a help-meet for him, but if this kind of relationship did not exist, there was no marriage, for God, according to Milton, never "joined" against the meaning of his own ordinance. Since none but a fit matrimony could signify the union of God, there could not be any hindrance of the divorce and the parties, either one of them, were free and might "take them to a second choice" (*Tetrachordon*, 664). Milton makes clear that "the glory of God and their esteemed fitness one for the other, was the motive which led them





both at first to think without other revelation that God had joined them together. So when it shall be found by their apparent unfitness, that their continuing to be man and wife is against the glory of God and their mutual happiness, it may assure them that God never joyn'd them; who hath reveal'd his gracious will not to set the ordinance above the man for whom it was ordained," (*Divorce*, 594). Milton bases his freedom to divorce upon a scriptural analogy: God himself was the first divorcer, for he had to divorce in order to create: "by His divorcing command the world first rose out of chaos" (*Divorce*, 592).

Divorce, for Milton, does not belong to any civil or earthly power (*Divorce*, 621). Divorce, like marriage, is properly and preferably a private matter of agreement between husband and wife who terminate the marriage bond according to their consciences, the law only being required to ensure that it is done by mutual consent and the conditions are not injurious. As far as Milton was concerned, not only did the marriage partners have the right, but the obligation, to dissolve the union in order to fulfil God's will: ". . .for it is not the outward continuing of marriage that keeps whole that covenant, but whosoever does most according to peace and love, whether in marriage or in divorce, he it is that breaks marriage least; it being so often written, that 'love only is the fulfilling of every commandment'" (*Divorce*, 586).

<sup>30</sup>Hieron, *Sermons*, 468.

<sup>31</sup>Gataker, *Good Wife*, 9.

<sup>32</sup>Milton, *Tetrachordon*, 664.

<sup>33</sup>Haller, *Puritan Art of Love*, 269.

<sup>34</sup>Milton, *Tetrachordon*, 657.

<sup>35</sup>William Whately seemed to offer some comments in dissolving the marriage bond. (*Bride-Bush*, 1617). One condition for voiding the marriage contract was adultery; having laid down the rule that husband and wife must yield wholly to one another, he declared that if either of them "shall frowardly and perversely withdraw themselves from this matrimonial society...the bond of matrimony is dissolved, and the other party so totally and truly loosed from it that...it shall be no sinne for him or her to make a new contract with another person" (25). When faced with these words before a High Commission, Whately quickly recanted them and reverted to traditional doctrine which denied remarriage.

<sup>36</sup>Milton, *Divorce*, 612.



## CHAPTER III

<sup>1</sup>*Comus* was an occasional poem written in connection with the celebration of the inauguration of the Earl of Bridgewater as Lord President of Wales and performed at Ludlow Castle, September, 1634. The poem as a whole was intended as a kind of compliment, but Milton used the poem for much more than this.

<sup>2</sup>Milton, *Comus*, 1.803.

<sup>3</sup>*Ibid.*, 1.803.

<sup>4</sup>*Ibid.*, 1.937.

<sup>5</sup>*Ibid.*, 11.745-47.

<sup>6</sup>See chapter two for previous discussion of this topic.

<sup>7</sup>Milton, *Comus*, 11.211-12.

<sup>8</sup>Woodhouse, "Argument," 46-71.

<sup>9</sup>Riley; *Infinite Variety*, 92.

<sup>10</sup>Milton, *Elegy VII*.

<sup>11</sup>Milton, *Sonnet II*.

<sup>12</sup>However brief the statement made here about the history of woman's inferiority, it by no means reflects the amount of historic material that supports the contention. For a full treatment see Francis Utley, *The Crooked Rib*; C. S. Wright, "Something More About Eve"; N. M. Hunt, *The Natural History of Love*.

<sup>13</sup>It should be unnecessary to say that this language of Eve's affection is not Milton's statement of the attitude he believed the wives of his day should take, yet some who have been blinded by the tradition of Milton's Turkish opinions, and are forgetful of the dramatic character of the poem, have gone to the length of supposing that it is.

<sup>14</sup>The creature whom God mentions that will please Adam will be

Thy likeness, thy fit help, thy other self  
Thy wish, exactly to thy heart's desire.  
(VIII, 450-51)

<sup>15</sup>VIII, 540-41. Adam explains that Eve's inferiority was "in the mind/ And inward Faculties."





<sup>16</sup>Gouge, *Domestical Duties*, 273.

<sup>17</sup>Milton, *Tetrachordon*, 657-58.

<sup>18</sup>Hanford maintains that Adam's secret thoughts is that Eve is unworthy of the enjoyment of "that moral freedom which is the portion of the mature human being." (Hanford, *Englishman*, 191).

<sup>19</sup>When Eve is confronted by the serpent she falls into the same trap as in her dream. In the presence of the tree she is faithful in her knowledge and statement of its forbidden nature, but Satan draws her into an argument of discussing the tree as a tree and she neglects to say as Adam had, that it is only the sign "of our obedience among so many signs of power and rule." What happens is that Eve discusses the tree and not the obedience as the concrete issue, and with that error made, she succumbs to argument. She has been talked into holding false reasoning true and has persisted in her initial mischoice. When Satan tempted Eve, he did not pretend that God wished her to eat the fruit, but merely that her own happiness would best be secured by disregarding God's command, since, as Satan argued, God's word was not the law of the universe. He tricked Eve, in other words, by confusing the issue.

<sup>20</sup>It is important here to emphasize A. H. Gilbert's comments on Milton as a dramatist ("Milton on the Position of Woman," *Modern Language Review*, XV, 240-64). It is perhaps sometimes a fault that a reader or a critic of Milton will equate Milton's own personal opinion with a speech by one of Milton's characters: "it is true that he, more than many writers, impressed his own personality on what he wrote, but it is absurd to think that he habitually put his own beliefs in the mouths of his characters" (244). Milton was familiar with the greatest of epics and dramas of all times, and he knew that "decorum" demanded that the speeches assigned to the agents in a dramatic work fit their characters and situations. On his power to analyze a situation and assign the proper sentiments to various speakers Milton's claim to dramatic ability is chiefly based. What Adam or Samson may say in love or anger should not be taken as Milton's consistent attitude. A reader must allow for the dramatic situation.

The lines (X, 867-901) spoken by Adam are natural for one in his state and they speak creditably of Milton as a skilful dramatic poet rather than of Milton a misogynist for these lines carry with them the truth of a dramatic, psychological reaction. They are true to the well-known tendency of human nature that leads one to lay the blame on others. Adam is unwilling to bear the responsibility for his own misdeeds and he projects this on the "weaker" Eve. Maud Bodkin interprets this tirade which Adam delivers against Eve as "a sense of man's terror of that weakness within himself which he projects upon the type of figure of woman." (Maud Bodkin, *Archetypal Patterns in Poetry*, London, 1934, 169.)

<sup>21</sup>Milton has portrayed the life history of the human race: the story of the fall with creation destroyed, restored, returned to readiness for new choice.



<sup>22</sup>The deliverance through Christ is one of the most important ideas of *Paradise Lost* and it would seem that Milton desired to give as much importance as possible to Eve's share in the deliverance, which was to undo her sin, and hence carried his insistence on the idea of woman's seed far beyond what is demanded by Scriptures.

<sup>23</sup>Powell, *Domestic Relations*, 176.

<sup>24</sup>Milton, *Tetrachordon*, 653.

<sup>25</sup>There is the possibility that the description of Dalila as a ship reflects something of the tradition of *The Ship of Fools* (originally stated by Sebastian Brant in his *Narrenschiff*, 1494). *The Ship of Fools*, in its various forms, was the best known literary treatment of folly, of human excesses and hypocrisies. Erasmus' treatment of Folly, in *The Praise of Folly*, follows the tradition started by Brant, and Erasmus has her present the most telling of arguments for the natural and instinctive life. Such a life is a relaxation from the disciplined and examined existence which man is potentially capable of achieving. A passage in *The Praise of Folly* (Ch.2) opens with Folly praising herself paradoxically for prudence or worldly wisdom, which, she argues, is learned only from experience. She argues that the wise man deliberately avoids experience, and can never become truly prudent. Of course, though, he would assert that worldly values are wrong, but Folly says that it is false modesty and fear that prevent him from being a successful man of action. At the end of her argument, somewhat degenerate and arrogant, she says her program is folly, but that is life and the only possible life, so nothing can be done about it.

The above passage has been described because it seems to parallel the situation of Dalila and Samson. Dalila does represent excess and folly. What she stands for is Samson's excess of passion, better said, his lack of reasoned control over this passion. Telling Dalila the secret of his strength was foolish and she stands before him now as a visual reminder of his folly. Like Folly, Dalila presents an argument for the natural and instinctive life: she desires to take Samson home to live with her in "leisure and domestic ease." The life she offers is full of folly for Samson, who represents, for Milton, the man potentially capable of a wise and examined existence. When Samson rejects Dalila she takes a stand somewhat like Folly's: arrogant, admitting the rewards she has gained through her actions, and, it appears, satisfied with the kind of life she will continue to live.

<sup>26</sup>In the divorce tracts, Milton had considered the marriage of persons of mixed religions and he explained that to the believer all God's creatures were pure, so man might marry an infidel in the hope of converting her. But he added that no believer was compelled to abide in his choice, existing against hope and strength, in a marriage that might corrupt his own faith. Divorce was open to him, but he ought to forbear while hope of conversion remained. Milton did not mention directly, in *Samson Agonistes*, the latter course of events which was open to Samson although it was the remedy virtually used by Samson when he rejected Dalila.





## CHAPTER IV

<sup>1</sup>J. H. Hanford makes a point of elaborating on Milton's own strong attraction to things beautiful in his article "The Temptation Motive in Milton," *SP*, XV (1918)..

<sup>2</sup>Milton believed that true Christian liberty frees the believer from the compulsion of all external precepts whatsoever. The only law that binds is the law written in the heart of the believer—his conscience. Milton's theory of regeneration depends upon such absolute freedom from constraint. It places the responsibility for purification squarely upon man, who must repeatedly use right reason to choose and rechoose.





## APPENDIX A

### SCRIPTURAL TEXTS USED BY PURITANS TO SUPPORT THEIR CONCEPT OF WOMAN

#### Proverbs 31, 10-31

Who can find a virtuous woman? for her price is far above rubies. The heart of her husband doth safely trust in her, so that he shall have no need of spoil. She will do him good and not evil all the days of her life. She seeketh wool, and flax, and worketh willingly with her hands. She is like the merchants' ships; she bringeth her food from afar. She riseth also while it is yet night, and giveth meat to her household, and a portion to her maidens. She considereth a field, and buyeth it: with the fruit of her hands she planteth a vineyard. She girdeth her loins with strength, and strengtheneth her arms. She perceiveth that her merchandise is good: her candle goeth not out by night. She layeth her hands to the spindle, and her hands hold the distaff. She stretcheth out her hand to the poor; yea, she reacheth forth her hands to the needy. She is not afraid of the snow for her household: for all her household are clothed with scarlet. She maketh herself coverings of tapestry; her clothing is silk and purple. Her husband is known in the gates, when he sitteth among the elders of the land. She maketh fine linen, and selleth it: and delivereth girdles unto the merchant. Strength and honor are her clothing; and she shall rejoice in time to come. She openeth her mouth with wisdom; and in her tongue is the law of kindness. She looketh well to the ways of her household, and eateth not the bread of idleness. Her children arise up,



and call her blessed; her husband also, and he praiseth her. Many daughters have done virtuously, but thou excellest them all. Favor is deceitful, and beauty is vain: but a woman that feareth the Lord, she shall be praised. Give her of the fruit of her hands; and let her own works praise her in the gates.

(King James version  
of Holy Bible)

I Corinthians 7, 2-11

Let each man have his own wife and each woman her own husband. The husband must give the wife what is due to her, and the wife equally must give the husband his due. The wife cannot claim her body as her own; it is her husband's. Equally, the husband cannot claim his body as his own; it is his wife's. . . .All this I say by way of concession, not command. I should like you all to be as I am myself; but everyone has the gift God has granted him. . . .To the married I give this ruling, which is not mine but the Lord's: a wife must not separate herself from her husband; if she does, she must either remain unmarried or be reconciled to her husband; and the husband must not divorce his wife.

Ephesians 5, 22-23

Wives, be subject to your husbands as to the Lord; for the man is the head of the woman, just as Christ also is the head of the church. Christ is, indeed, the Saviour of the body; but just as the church is subject to Christ, so must women be to their husbands in everything. Husbands, love your wives, as Christ also loved the church and gave himself up for it, to consecrate it, cleansing it by water and word, so that he might present the church to himself all glorious, with no stain





or wrinkle or anything of the sort, but holy and without blemish. In the same way men also are bound to love their wives, as they love their own bodies. . . .each of you must love his wife as his very self; and the woman must see to it that she pays her husband all respect.

Colossians 3, 18-19

Wives, be subject to your husbands: that is your Christian duty.  
Husbands, love your wives and do not be harsh with them.

I Timothy 2, 11-13

A woman must be a learner, listening quietly and with due submission. I do not permit a woman to be a teacher, nor must woman domineer over man; she should be quiet. For Adam was created first, and Eve afterwards. . . .

Hebrews 13, 4

Marriage is honourable; let us all keep it so, and the marriage-bond inviolate; for God's judgment will fall on fornicators and adulterers.

(The New English Bible)



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1. *ES* - *English Studies*
2. *HLQ* - *Huntington Library Quarterly*
3. *ELH* - *Journal of English Literary History*
4. *MLR* - *Modern Language Review*
5. *PMLA* - *Publications of the Modern Language Association*
6. *SP* - *Studies in Philology*
7. *UTQ* - *University of Toronto Quarterly*

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